

Later, it would have been difficult to agree with her.
Yourself imprisoned by a hard faith
You stamped your nation with death and technology.
At the end, you lived in one room, which you hardly
ever left.

We still do not know if it could have been done
differently.
Something analogous to natural law
Has moved on the earth. Awed, we wonder
How after this, there can be any human joy.

Only your daughter, whom you disowned,
Reminds us that if people are precious, we should
pardon you, too.

Three Yoruba Poems

'Death by Drowning'

Don't swim
in the river. Don't go swimming.
It was the crest lifted --
the children were gone.

'Market Seller'

She sells fried plantain:
she sells dumplings of bean-flour:
on this particular day, she made no sale.

She lives like someone who is subject to a disease.

*The Yoruba originals of these poems are folk verses, common in various parts of Western Nigeria. The Yoruba text of 'Diviners' was first collected by the Nigerian poet Adeboye Babalola, that of 'Market Seller' by the composer Fela Sowande, who uses its rhythms and tones in the last movement of his 'African Suite' and that of 'Death by Drowning' by myself in Abeokuta. Strictly speaking the English poems are only equivalents rather than translations, for reasons of language difficulty. The Yoruba of 'Death by Drowning' for instance is only eight words long:

Ma lo 'we l'okumo:
Oun gbe won lo.

'Diviners'

Under the iroko tree the old men are tossing nuts.
Three strokes across and two strokes down
is for the harmattan wind.
is for trouble, sickness, hunger.
Who can plan for the future when the experts disagree?

-- C. C. Hebron

Birtley, Co. Durham, England

Nightshirts

I shall praise nightshirts
whether striped or dotted
that shrink in the wash.

But your gift especially --
which tickles the hips.
rides an erection.

When I slide into bed
how cool your sheet is
to my bare ass.

Short of Eating Slugs

My three-year-old finds slugs beneath each stone.
Fondles them, hugs them, wants to chew them up.
Delights in everything that's like a slug.
(Even the yellow haddock on his plate
is obvious to him in its resemblance.)
When he repeats to me that boys like slugs,
it seems I've made the statement necessary.
Though, short of eating them, I like slugs too.

-- Knute Skinner

Killaspuglonane. Kilshanny. Co. Clare.
Ireland